

HAUL

by

Emily Schiffer

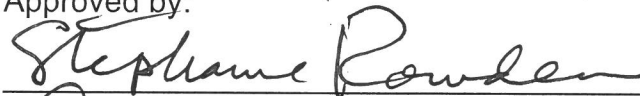
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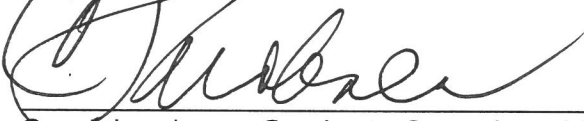
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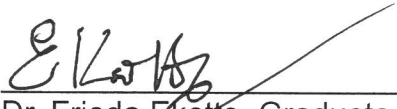
Approved by:



Stephanie Rowden, Graduate Committee Chair



Carol Jacobsen, Graduate Committee Member



Dr. Frieda Ekotto, Graduate Committee Member



David Chung, Director MFA Graduate Program



Elona Van Gent, Associate Dean of Academic Programs



Gunalan Nadarajan, Dean, Stamps School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: April 30, 2016

# HAUL

EMILY SCHIFFER





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## **ABSTRACT**

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Through photography and sculpture, *Haul* reimagines the concept of a family album to explore the intergenerational transmission of history and trauma.

## **KEYWORDS**

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Family, History, Memory, Trauma, Culture, Transmission, Photography, Sculpture, Album, Absence, Intergenerational

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## Introduction: Letter to My Daughter Lola

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*My Dear Lola,*

*I want to tell you about the work I made when you were two and three. As you know, your grandparents on both sides are trauma survivors who rarely discussed the details of their pasts. In anticipation of your growing selfhood, I was particularly interested in how unspoken pain is passed between generations.*

*This project began in 2012, when your grandfather Daniel's stage IV cancer diagnosis overlapped with news that I was pregnant with you. Losing him while becoming a parent pulled me toward the past and also the future, raising questions about how unspoken pain is passed between generations. Papa's father survived the Maquis (the violent civil war preceding Cameroon's independence from France). My parents grew up in homes where family dysfunction threatened their physical and emotional safety. Though our resilient parents raised us in safety and love, a heaviness and vulnerability were palpable in both families. I'm fascinated by the impossible task of unraveling how these histories shaped the people who are shaping you. My installation, "Haul," is my attempt to gather the remnants of our family's experiences, and visualize their silences and narratives intertwined.*

*I titled this work "Haul" because its meanings resonate with my work:*

*The act of pulling or dragging something with effort.*

*An unusually large amount of something that has been won, collected, or stolen.*

*A distance to be traveled.*

*My parents love for each other and me made their pasts bearable. They did not hide their experiences from me exactly, but rather spoke about them in words that were revealing from their perspective but vague from mine, "My childhood was troubled," or "It was very hard." It wasn't until I neared adulthood, when my questions and their*

*answers grew more specific, that I grasped the gravity of their circumstances and the pain in their retelling. With respect for their and Grandpa Daniel's courage, I invite you to travel with me across generations, to feel the fullness of their silences.*

Love,

Mama

## CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

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### PART I: MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

*Transmission is the giving of a task. The next generation must grapple with the trauma, find ways of representing it and spare transmitting the experience of hell back to one's parents. A main task of transmission is to resist disassociating from the family heritage and bring its full, tragic story into social discourse.*

- *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*, M. Gerard Fromm (2011)

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Psychiatrist Judith Herman describes the central dialectic of psychological trauma as, “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud.”<sup>1</sup> When applied to inter-generational familial relationships, this dilemma becomes all the more complicated. Silence often becomes the default way this conflict is manifested.

This is the subject of *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*, edited by M. Gerard Fromm (2011). This collection of essays on traumatic transmission builds on the idea that “what human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York. NY. Basic Books. 1992.

a chaotic urgency.”<sup>2</sup> Silence is not necessarily emptiness. It can be very heavy and full—often with, “affective sensitivity” and “chaotic urgency.” One of the challenges second generation trauma survivors face is coming to understand that silence is not emptiness. While Herman describes the person who deals with the trauma, who feels a dialectic relationship between denying or proclaiming, Fromm describes the generations afterwards, who don’t have a dialectic to manage. Instead, later generations face more of a deconstruction exercise, a figuring out of what’s in the silence. The “conflict” Herman refers to, of whether to “deny” or “proclaim,” becomes a “dilemma” for the next generations. It is therefore easier for them to revisit and acknowledge trauma.

History isn’t an absolute moment, but rather a series of subjective experiences that make up a larger narrative. Scholar Marianne Hirsch’s work explores the transmission of memories of violence across generations. She uses the term “post-memory” to describe the transmission of trauma:

“Post-memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by a previous generation’s trauma, which can be neither understood nor recreated. Post-memory is powerful precisely because its connection to the past is mediated through imagination. It is dangerous because there is no real experience to ground oneself in. Photographs often provide younger generations a link between fantasy and their elders’ traumas. Yet photographs are agents of both remembering and forgetting.”<sup>3</sup>

Because my work utilizes family photographs, it is important to acknowledge the role family images play in constructing family narratives. Most people photograph the moments they want to remember. They do not (usually) photograph painful or complicated events. This relegates undocumented experiences to an individual’s private memories, and minimizes their place in a family’s collective consciousness. Photographs provide a visual anchor to a specific time, and are thus a bridge between

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<sup>2</sup>M. Gerard Fromm. *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*. New York, NY. Karnac Books. 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Marianne Hirsch. *The Generation of Post-memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*.



first-and second-generation memory and post-memory.<sup>4</sup> But if the main access to the past is through images and traumatic events tend not to be photographed, then how does one understand one's post-memories?

In her memoir, *Holding Still*, photographer Sally Mann further describes the relationship between images and memory: "Photography would seem to preserve our past, but I think that is a fallacy: photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories. As I held my childhood pictures in my hands, in the tenderness of my 'remembering,' I also knew that with each photograph I was forgetting."<sup>5</sup> Hirsch goes even further to say, "Photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not."

In *Camera Lucida*, philosopher Roland Barthes coins the term, "the punctum of an image," which he describes as an, "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.... A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me, but also bruises me, is poignant to me."<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that by combining Barthes' concept of *punctum* with Hirsch's theory of post memory to assert that the family images (even those that depict happiness) of trauma survivors remind their children not only of mortality, but of past emotional pain. It is the *punctum*, the piercing detail such as sadness in someone's eyes, or the curled gesture of a hand, which move a viewer to scour the image for an entry point into an intangible realm of affect. Barthes writes:

"The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence — as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence ... The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false

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<sup>4</sup> Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997

<sup>5</sup>Sally Mann. *Hold Still: A Memoir With Photographs*. New York, NY, Little Brown and Company. 2015.

<sup>6</sup>Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York. Hill and Wang. 1980.

on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest “shared” hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality.”<sup>7</sup>



Image of the artist's grandmother and aunt

Take for example, the photograph (left) of my maternal grandmother and aunt. Knowing that they were both victims and perpetrators of rage makes me search the details of the image for traces of those experiences. The *punctum* for me is in the directness of my child-aunt's gaze, the tension in my grandmother's jaw, in the close proximity of their bodies, which suggest familiarity but not comfort. This *punctum* is compounded by my own post-memory: my imagination of their relationship and personal pain. This image, the only visual trace I have of their early relationship,

validates my imaginings about their young lives while reminding me that I will always be estranged from their experience.

Scientific research suggests that post-memory is not only experiential: trauma alters DNA, which is passed to the cells of future generations.<sup>8</sup> Epigenetics—the study of how genes can be turned on and off and expressed differently through changes in environment and behavior—has shed new light on the field of mental health. Psychiatrist and Researcher Rachel Yehuda studied the children of Holocaust survivors, and children of 9/11 survivors who were pregnant during the attacks. Dr. Yehuda found

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York. Hill and Wang. 1980.

<sup>8</sup> *Isr J Psychiatry Relat Sci*. 2013;50(1):33-9. Epigenetic transmission of Holocaust trauma: can nightmares be inherited? Kellermann NP1. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24029109>

that children whose parents were suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) were most likely to develop depression anxiety or PTSD when exposed to interpersonal distress in their own lives. The research showed the children of parents with PTSD had lower thresholds for feeling overwhelmed than the control groups. Prior to this research, it was known that learned behaviors affect children's ways of coping, but this research is groundbreaking because it demonstrates that psychological behaviors can be forecast at a cellular level. These findings link science to Hirsch's theory of post-memory, grounding her assertion that, "Mothers' stories and children's stories are always intertwined: only theory can try to keep them comfortably separate."<sup>9</sup> Yehuda's findings are also relevant for me personally, as they suggest that I have literally and physically inherited my family's trauma, posing new questions to what it means to be the child of trauma survivors.

## PART II: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN AMERICA

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*Dear Lola,*

*While making this work, I was guided by my belief that sometimes connection is fast and deep and effortless. That sometimes connection can strip divisiveness off race and class and gender, transforming them into details that shape how we experience the world instead of categories of separation. I believe that sometimes, often even, love can be simple and easy.*

*But I believe that sometimes—in life, and in the releasing of art into the world—the social weight of race and class and gender can crush effortless love.*

*In Obama's memoir, "Dreams of my Father," Obama talks about a relationship he had with a white woman, about how safe and warm and lovely they were together. But he*

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<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997

*left her, because eventually they had to live in the world. And the differences in their experiences were too painful. This resonated on a deep level. I have experienced several times the power of the outside world to undo what I hold dear.*

*I do not believe that love conquers all. Instead I think that it is fragile. Photography—documentary photography in particular— is problematic because too many viewers forget that an image is just a fraction of a second from a specific angle. It's easier to simplify and categorize people than to know them, and photography perpetuates this ease.*

*It's a risky gesture to deliver work about one's loved ones into the segregation of America. If you are white and your loved ones are not, it's easy to let viewers' eyes establish boundaries you don't feel.*

*A decade ago I began working in South Dakota, on a project with Native American children that grew out of the purest connection I'd felt in my adult life. For years I'd leave our bliss and return home to New York, where people saw poverty in my images and stopped looking. At the same time I had to try and look inward and question the potential power imbalances that accompany race and age and class. I grappled with my whiteness, with the fact that I'd joined the long list of outsiders photographing life on the Rez. I grappled with wanting to share my work, and not wanting the children I loved to be reduced to strangers' assumptions. After years of searching, I came to accept that my experience and the segregation we live in do not line up. For me and the children—even now that they're grown— our relationship really isn't complicated.*

*It's possible to acknowledge the complexities of histories and identities and families without jamming them into simplified or ill-fitting stereotypes. But I'm not sure I know how to do this outside my warm little world. Almost exclusively, I photograph people I know and love. But I worry that the sadness and heaviness that's present in all my work will objectify the people in my images. Can you photograph an unsmiling person of color*

*(especially in black and white) without contributing to the canon of oppression? In this new work in “Haul,” questions are emerging about race and representation and family.*

*Does releasing “Haul” to others make it important that Papa is black and I am white? Do race and class touch our family in ways others see and I don’t feel? Is it important that Papa’s cousins in Cameroon are poor? Would it be better to only show photographs of white people? Is it possible to photograph an experience and have someone else get it just by looking? Is it important that an art-going audience (which lives for the most part in segregation) understands my point of view?*

*I made this work to begin a conversation with you about how each of us carries our family’s memories and traumas. I look forward to traveling this distance with you and watching your perspective evolve.*

Love,  
Mama

## **DISCUSSION: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN AMERICA**

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Racism is another form of trauma. In his 1929 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois coined the term double consciousness: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger claims that, “A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor

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<sup>10</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903.

and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.”<sup>11</sup>



**SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,  
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,  
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.**

*Waterbearer*, Lorna Simpson, 1986

In her work from the 1980s and 90s, artist Lorna Simpson refutes the internal and external objectification of gender and racial stereotypes by not granting the viewer access to her subjects' faces. She explains, "Portraiture doesn't necessarily have to correlate to having this facial expression where there's a reciprocal gaze, as though you

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<sup>11</sup>John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. New York, NY. Penguin Books. 1990.



know something about the subjects because you can gaze into their eyes. The strategy in my work has been to kind of depersonalize that a little bit. By eliminating that quiet gaze back and forth, it gets the viewer to question, 'Well then, who is the subject?' This is a refusal on my part to provide some monolithic identity, particularly an African American or black identity,"<sup>12</sup> Simpson adds complexity to her images by pairing them with text. The meaning of her work exists in the space between her text and images, which play off of each other, dissuading a simplified read, and posing questions about the relationship between the viewer and viewed.

The generic representation of families as racially and culturally uniform in mainstream American media, in the art world, and in documentary photography, make the mixing of my family's Jewish, Italian, and Cameroonian cultures conspicuous. Further, mainstream conceptions of identity are fixed instead of fluid. They don't acknowledge that a mix is a mixture. The cultural aspects of my husband's family being Cameroonian and American, and mine being Italian, Jewish and American is likely to be lost in mainstream visual culture.

Our private world does, however, remain tethered to a racialized outer context. For me, race hovers along the surface, and is far less interesting than the cultures that are stifled by this polarized framework. Unapologetically I presented my family as a family with rich and complex pasts. I did not frame my work in terms of race because I (perhaps not without a fair dose of naïveté) thought it obvious that we come from multiple diasporas. The trend of viewer's responses to my exhibit is fascinating! In the midwestern context that this work was first shown, countless viewers have asked me to address race in my theoretical framework. Why do so many people see non-whiteness and assume that the conversation should revolve around race? Does showing "raced" people without explicitly talking about race put viewers in an uncomfortable position? Is it less comfortable to confront one's racial assumptions without guidance or validation? Is it possible to acknowledge that race shapes experience, without making it a central theme in this work? If my family were only white, would people want to talk about race?

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<sup>12</sup> <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/apr/17/entertainment/et-simpson17>

In *Citizen*, writer Claudia Rankine's describes the experience of avoiding confrontation about mildly offensive comments: "As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache-producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going."<sup>13</sup>

I am perturbed by the difference between outsider's reactions and my own toward images of my white and black families. Frequent interpretations of my black family members facial expressions as sad instead of neutral, or menacing instead of confident, point to an inherent racial bias that must be addressed when discussing the interpretation of my images. New York University neuroscientist David Amodio's research is relevant to my work because it confirms racial bias: "In a number of classic studies, research subjects are asked to complete a seemingly simple task, such as watching words pop up on a screen and quickly categorizing those words as either positive, like "happy," or negative, like "fear." But right before the word appears, a face, either black or white, flashes on the screen. What we find over and over again in the literature, is that if a black person's face was shown really quickly, then people are quicker at categorizing negative words than positive words that follow it. Versus if a white face was shown really quickly, people are usually quicker to categorize the positive words, compared with the negative words."<sup>14</sup>

Artist Christian Boltanski further describes the presumptions we bring to art, "in fact, we do not really look. We do not see anything *in* the image. The image produces, however,

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<sup>13</sup> Claudia Rankine. *Citizen*. New York, NY. Goodreads. 2015.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2014/05/inquiring-minds-david-amodio-your-brain-on-racism>, Derks, Belle. *Neuroscience of Prejudice and Intergroup Relations*. Psychology Press, New York. 2013.

memories of situations or places which are similar to what we see in the image. We are not led into the image, we are led back into our memories.”<sup>15</sup>

## EXHIBITION

### PART I

#### HAUL: GIFT TO MY DAUGHTER



*Haul: Gift to My Daughter*, Emily Schiffer, 2016

In this installation work, I explored photography as an imperfect tool for understanding one's family. Within the context of family history, the gaps between moments are as important as an image's content. As I delved deeper into the elusiveness and weight of my family's history, I was inspired to create a sculpture comprised of the contents of my parents' and husband's parents' photo albums from before we were born. Hanging from

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<sup>15</sup> E. Van Alphen, *Natzism in the Family Album*, Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, 47.

the ceiling in a giant handmade fishing net, the sculpture considers what my husband and I are collectively “giving” my daughter, and the impossible task of gathering one’s history. The net was intended to suggest that only part of our history has been captured. I included photographs taken before my husband and I were born to emphasize our inability to understand and translate the past to our daughter. I was interested in the moments that were not photographed: moments of violence and fear, of which my husband and I have heard only fragments. Will they be eventually omitted from the family narrative, since they are not immortalized in photographs? How can one visualize a pain that is felt but not seen?



Detail: *Haul: Gift to My Daughter*, Emily Schiffer, 2016

Migration is another form of trauma. I wanted to reference the displacement: the loss of one’s home, culture, and identity, which affected my relatives (my Jewish great-grand parents, who fled anti-semitism in Austria and Russia, my Italian grandparents, who left poverty in rural Italy, and my Cameroonian in-laws, who left behind a stable life

in a developing country for the promises of America). The net implied that it’s not possible to catch everything into the frame as my family moves forward.

The round shape of the net echoed the shape of a pregnant belly, a personal reference to the events that inspired this project: my daughter’s birth and my father in-law’s death. Each image was framed, an act intended to elevate the photographs into precious objects and honor the importance of each moment. Studying images of immediate family members throughout the different phases of their lives gave me a newfound





Haul (Detail), Emily Schiffer, 2016

appreciation for the depth and breadth of their experiences. I became attached to images that revealed the evolution of our parents' and grandparents' personalities. I tried hard to make them visible on the surface of the sculpture. But there were too many images, and they buried each other. Even as I was making the sculpture, I couldn't remember all of what was inside. I imagine that at some future point my daughter will be faced with a similar longing? Images poked through the holes in the net, threatening to fall through the gaps, and echoing the elusiveness of memory. The fact that individual images are easily lost, speaks to our inability to access a past we may or may not wish to revisit.

## ARTISTS IN DIALOG

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*Haul: Gift to My Daughter* was inspired by several artworks and novels, most notably, Lorna Simpson's *Please Remind Me of Who I Am* (below). In this series of found images from photo booths from the 20's and 30's, Simpson uses a first person voice to



*Please Remind Me of Who I Am*, Lorna Simpson, 2009



Chiharu Shiota's, *The Key in the Hand*, 2015.



speak collectively about inheriting an unknown past. This piece addresses the unfulfilled longing to know where one comes from, which in this case is specific to African-Americans. Much of the power of this work is derived from the accumulation, and the haphazard, chaotic feeling of the arrangement of images on the wall. Similarly, *Haul* is also intended to remind my family of who we are. It too is a chaotic accumulation, but the images are personal and most are buried, suggesting that gaps in important information are still present when a family's lineage is known.

When I saw Chiharu Shiota's, *The Key in the Hand* (above), an immersive installation about memory, I wanted to visualize the weight of silence. I realized that I needed to have my family's archive hang in the air in order to feel their weight and illuminate gaps in the story. I began to explore how the meaning of my sculpture would shift as I adjusted its height. Ultimately, I positioned it about two feet off the floor, high enough to create tension between the net and the ground, yet low enough to accentuate the net's weight.

Christian Boltanski's ability to speak to absence, memory, and trauma also inspired this work. Boltanski's *Personnes* (below) addresses the holocaust. Grids of clothing line the floor, representing German concentration camps. Collected recordings of heartbeats create a steady pulse throughout the installation, reminding viewers of life and death. In the middle of the room is a huge pile of clothes with a claw reminiscent of a carnival game dangling above, picking up and dropping clothes. "Personnes," in French has a double meaning. Depending on the context it either means somebody or nobody. Boltanski comments on the symbolism "for some years now I have been interested in the hand of God... in chance." He writes "You can hold onto the clothes, and even the heartbeats of many, many people. But you can't keep anybody." Similarly, the photographs in *Haul* speak to loss, to the sadness of not being able to keep our family members.



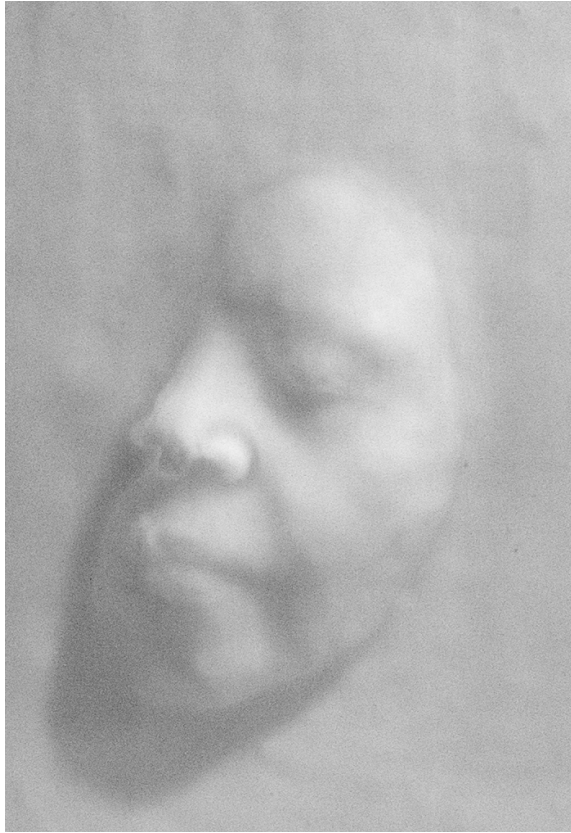
*Personnes*, Christian Boltanski, 2010

## Part II

### Us: Impressions from 2016

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The deep link between memory and one's understanding of the world inspires many artists to focus explicitly on memory. For quite some time I have been interested in visualizing the intangible. As we attempt to save something for posterity, an ironic problem emerges: memories illuminate absence. I found myself wondering if that absence — the physical space of memory— can be visualized in some way.



*Nana*, Emily Schiffer, 2016

In *Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory*, critic Zsófia Bán describes the unique role objects play in our remembering: “Objects, because of their banality, material reality, texture, and accidental, non-artistic character, are even more evocative and poignant than photos. They point to the absence of the person.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than immortalize my family’s faces in a photograph, I chose to make physical objects. I recorded our faces (including my own) by casting wax impressions, which due to the sensitivity and malleability of wax, referenced memory by slowly changing over the course of the exhibit. The empty cavity of the mold compelled me. I sought to capture the space that we occupy in life and my daughter’s mind. Imbedded in the

walls and illuminated from behind, sat wax impressions of the six family members with whom my daughter is closest. The empty space our real-life selves once filled changed shape depending on the viewer’s perspective, often taking on the illusion of being a positive rather than negative form. This work was made with urgency. At stake was the possibility of forgetting this moment of unrestrained love that each of us shares with my three year-old daughter. By inviting the viewer to use his or her imagination to connect the missing pieces, I sought to make him or her feel the impossibility of reconstructing the real whole.

I installed this work in the same room as *Haul: Gift to My Daughter* to establish a dialogue between the photographic portraits of my family archive, and the three

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<sup>16</sup> Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai. *Exposed Memories: Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2010. (172)



dimensional impressions of our faces. The *punctum* of the images in the net echoed the *punctum* of the negative space in the wax impressions, driving home the impending reality of death. The gentle swaying of the net drew attention to the silence and stillness that permeated the room.



*Haul: Gift to My Daughter and Us: Impressions from 2016 Installation*

As I produced this work and imagined my parents' childhoods in their unstable homes, I found validation and solace in Mengetsu's descriptions of his childhood in *How to Read The Air* :

*"As a child I learned quickly that a fight was never far off or long in the making, and imagined it sometimes as a real physical presence lurking in the shadows of wherever space my parents happened to occupy at that given moment—a grocery store, a car, a restaurant. I pictured the fight sitting down with us on the couch in front of the television, a solemn black figure in executioner's robes, a caricature of death and tragedy clearly stolen from books and movies but no less real as a result. Ghosts are common to the life of any child: mine just happened to come to dinner more often than most."*<sup>17</sup>

## Artists in Dialogue

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Shimone Atte, chromogenic photograph, from the project *The Writing on the Wall*, Berlin, Germany, 1991

Art about memory is surrounded by a rich dialogue about the act of remembering and the specifics of experience. Many artists explore the concepts of memory and the intangible. Shimon Attie exploits both photography's capacity to evoke absence as well as presence. He rebuilds a ruined world on the very site of its ruin. Attie matches

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<sup>17</sup> Dinaw Mengestu. *How to Read the Air*. New York, NY, Penguin Group. 2010.



*House*, Rachel Whiteread, 1993

historic photographs of Jewish people outdoors in the Jewish quarter of Berlin during the 1920s and 30s with the contemporary site. He projects these images of onto the locations in which they were originally taken, prompting the public to remember Holocaust victims, and consider the tragic history of the space they inhabited. I am drawn to the ephemerality of Attie's installations. Like Attie, I'm interested in this concept of trying to see a visceral yet invisible presence.

Rachael Whiteread's work also uses negative space to make viewers aware of what isn't there. Her work, *House* visualizes the memory of a building that once was someone's home. Details on the surfaces of her casts were one a part of someone's life, but they reveal only pared-down traces of that life. In *Us*, my goals are similar. I aim to reveal the intimate space of facial gestures within the space my family and I occupy.

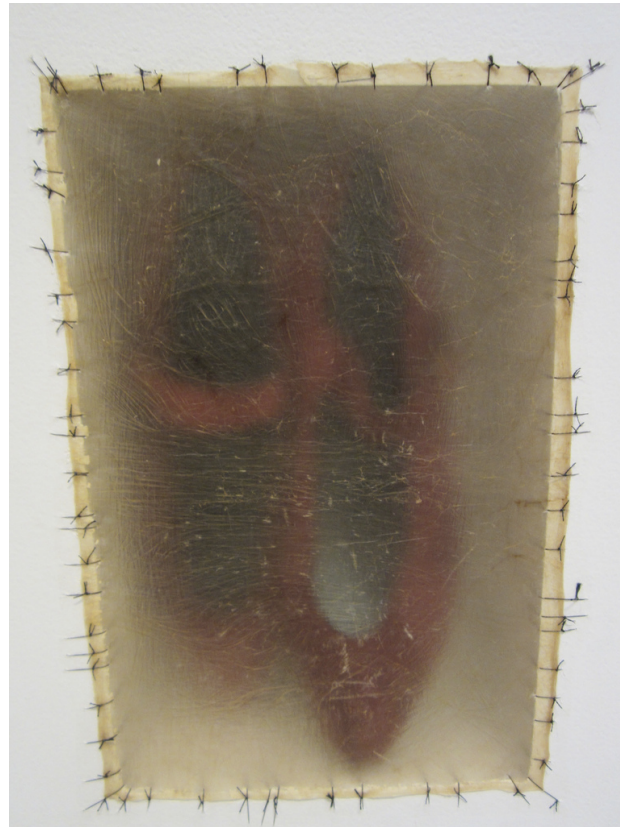
Leona and Gavin Christie, a brother/sister artistic team, also use text to evoke memory. They create work inspired by Gavin's photographic memory and experience of life



with autism (below). White on white polymer embossed engravings of text listing memorized inventories (driving directions and mileage distances, TV guide listings, cereals from the 1980s, texts from childhood books, etc.), question what remains after a moment ends, and use negative space to evoke feelings of nostalgia and absence.<sup>18</sup>



"Dark Woods, Light woods" (detail),  
Leona & Gavin Christie 2010-12



Doris Saucedo, *Atrabilarios*, 1992

Doris Saucedo's *Atrabilarios* (above) visualizes a counter memory to the dominant Historical narrative in Colombia. Her work depicts personal memories that she collected from the families of the dead and disappeared in Colombia. The memories are told to her directly, but she presents them in a way that is elliptical rather than specific. This work talks about the pain of people disappearing without trace. To illustrate this, she collects the shoes of the disappeared, the impressions in them are the only material record of someone's existence. Surprisingly, she presents them to us with animal skin

<sup>18</sup> Amy Chaloupka, Leslie Umberger, Anne Davis Basting Sheboygan. *Hiding Places: Memory in the Arts*. Madison, WI: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2011. (53).

obstructing the negative space left by the individual's feet. The stories are private, we are given the privilege of knowing of them but not about them specifically.

### Part III: Album

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*Album*, Emily Schiffer, 2016 Installation

After twelve years as a documentary photographer, I felt it necessary to document my own family and life. I had reached a milestone of sorts: it no longer felt ethical to photograph other people's complex lives if I couldn't tackle my own. Journalistic integrity is extremely important to me, and when I shifted the lens to the inner circles of my family I maintained the same rules: don't pose people or arrange objects, and stay as true to the moment as possible. Regardless of the subject matter, I am interested in capturing essential details of life that are often overshadowed by larger, more eye-catching circumstances. Emotion, be it connection, disconnection, comfort or pain,



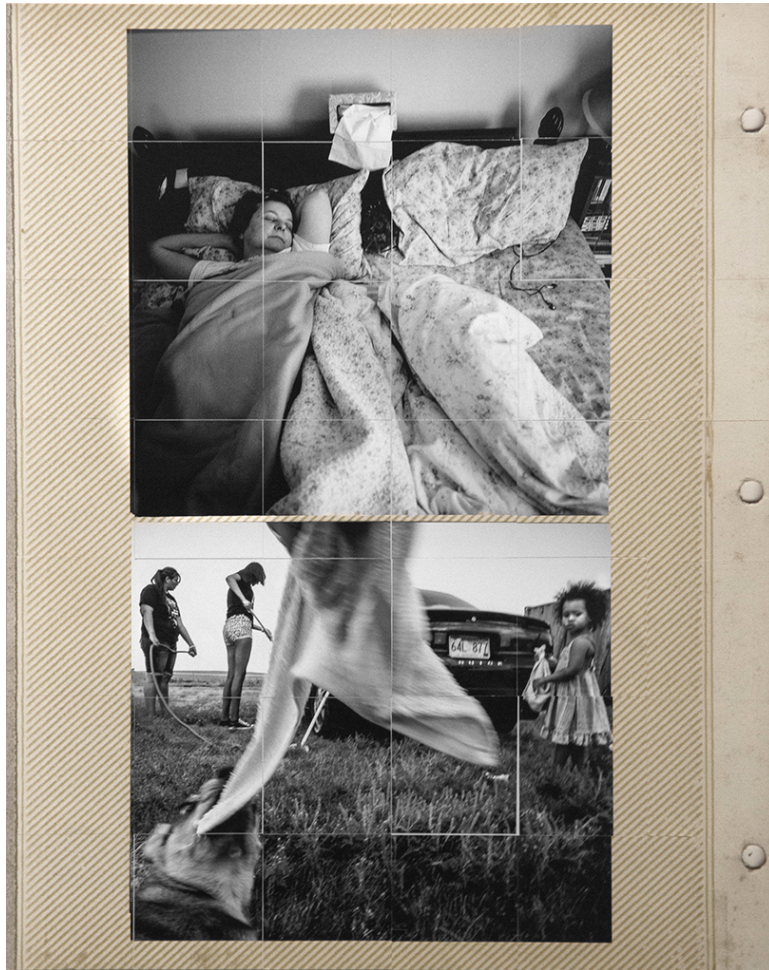
moves me to lift my camera. Taking and looking at photographs immerses me in a moment, so that I may be present with nuances that I would otherwise miss. Success for me is when the meaning of a picture extends beyond what's depicted in the frame. I will use the term, "metaphor" to describe the sense of movement that comes from searching: the evoking of emotions and referencing of ideas or eras that aren't literally represented in an image.



*Comfort*, Emily Schiffer, 2016

I entered graduate school interested in the metaphorical potential of images. I sought to tell my family's story by presenting vignettes of life. My father in-law's death echoed the tangled despair I'd felt at sixteen, when six people in my family died and I was temporarily handicapped by a complicated knee surgery. First as a teenager and later

as an adult, I turned to visual art instead of words. As I created the images that would later be used in *Album*, I questioned how one can capture the moments of transition between when someone is living and when they are gone. I longed to convey the presence of absence, and to show the impact of death on a family. Likewise, I wanted to depict what it's like to live with post-memory.



*Mom in the Morning. Carwash.* Emily Schiffer, 2016

In the intro of his upcoming book *Flesh and Blood*, Curator Gordon Stettinius speaks to the universalism of family imagery, “Generation by generation, it seems we are all made of the same stuff. Mothers from everywhere recognize what it means to hold their children for the first time. Grown children everywhere recognize what it means to see your parents slowing down. Many of us are parents and children and lovers simultaneously. Our bodies are changing, mortality swirls around us, our children are the echoes of our loved ones.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, I aimed to

use specific moments in my family’s life to speak more universally. In the American context in which they were first shown they have an added dimension. My images counter the persistent narrative that race is divisive. In sharing my family images, I invite viewers to see us as I do, as we do: as a family.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Stettinius. *Flesh and Blood*. Richmond, VA. Caldela Books. 2016



Drawing upon documentary images I've taken of my family over the past eight years, I paired unrelated images to create fictions that imply truth. These new narratives probe questions about intimacy and silence, youth and aging, unresolved relationships, and love. I questioned the truths we assemble from images-- both their possibility and limitations. The pairings were placed into family albums (a familial context), scanned, printed 4 feet by 5 feet, and sliced into small pieces. In *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, Hornstein and Jacobwitz point to scale as an important tool when commemorating, noting that large works are often employed to evoke an overwhelming historical weight. To this end, I sought to commemorate mundane moments in my family's lives and to infer that subtlety can have weight, which carries them beyond the moment, beyond the every-day. The fragmenting and reassembling of my images was intended to mimic the natural process of memory, in which small, imperfectly fitting pieces come together to create larger, cohesive narratives.

## ARTISTS IN DIALOG

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*Naptime 1989, Sally Mann, 1989*

Many photographers turn their lens toward their family to critically examine the human condition. In 1992, Sally Mann released *Immediate Family*, a book of intimate photographs of her three children (above) that challenged accepted notions of children's innocence, power, and sensuality. Often depicted nude, her children's direct and confident gaze challenged viewers to accept them as independent individuals. This work survived the harsh criticism it received, emerging decades later as a defining voice in the history of photography in general and the representation of children specifically. Sally Mann's eye for composition, tone and gesture have inspired my work since I was introduced to her at sixteen.



*Family Images and Stories*, Carrie Mae Weems, 1981

Carrie Mae Weems's first major body of work, *Family Images and Stories*, presents candid moments within her own family. Written captions and audio recordings accompany the images, illuminating aspects of their shared history. Weems says her

primary goal with this series was to describe her family as a real family, with strong bonds. Together, the photographs and narratives create an in-depth and realistic portrait of a middle-class African American family. The work is meant to stand in contrast to a 1965 report written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which blamed “the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society” on a weak family structure. Weems believes that, “Photography can be used as a powerful weapon toward instituting political and cultural change.”<sup>20</sup> In this American context, where race does matter, I look to Weems and an example of how to acknowledge the multiple races and cultures in my family, in a way that is genuine, and doesn’t overshadow the breadth of our family’s experiences. Later, in her *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems created 24 staged images around her kitchen table, prompting us to reconsider romance, motherhood, and solitude. I too hope that my images of mundane moments can inspire others to reflect on connection and disconnection, silence, love, and health.



*Untitled Passport Series*, Keisha Scarville, 2013

In her *Untitled Passport Series* (left), Keisha Scarville paints, draws and collages onto a single image of her father to explore themes of memory, familiarity, and belonging. Scarville chose to use her father’s first passport photo as a site of exploration because, “The image was taken when he was barely out of his teens, a time before we are known to each other or existed as father and daughter. I would stare at it for long periods of time and look for clues about this young man frozen in the distant past.” The photo reminds her that she carries the history of her Guyanese

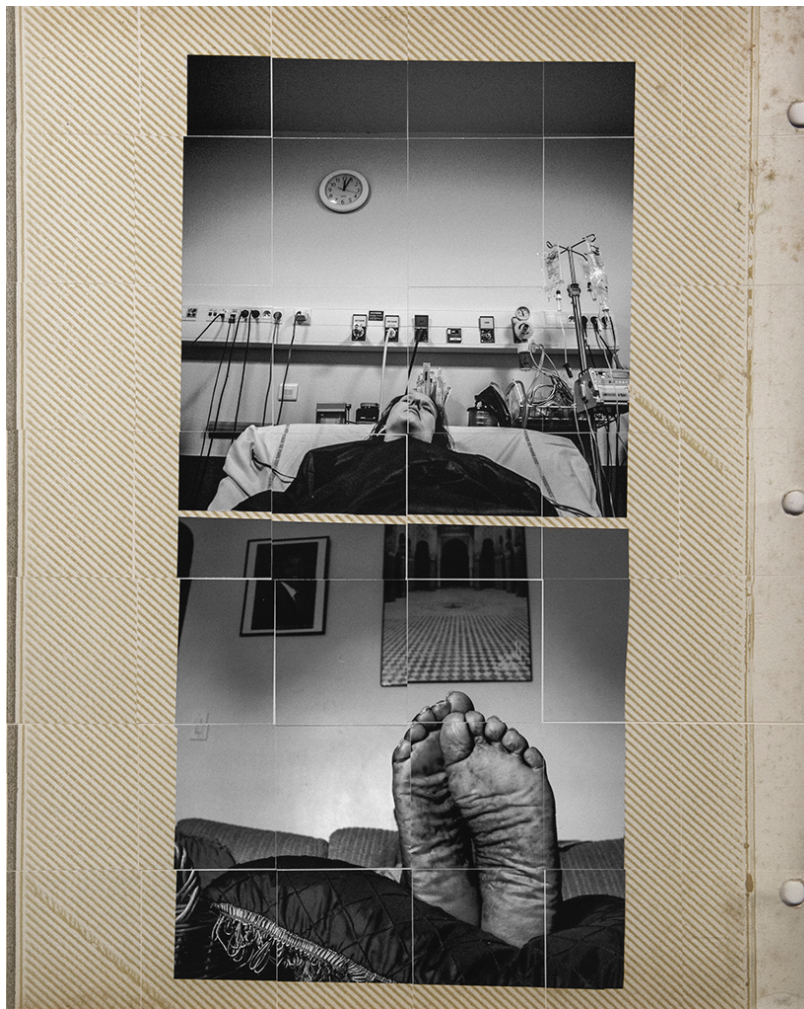
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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/carrie-mae-weems-family-reunion-from-family-pictures-and-stories>

parents, who lived through a different era. As Scarville creates this series, comprised of several hundred images, she reimagines her father's life and their relationship, creating insight through imagination. This series moves me because I too have held images from my parents' pasts in my hands and searched for insight about the people I know. Her work inspired me to examine my relationship with my family's images in *Haul: Gift to My Daughter*, and also to reimagine my own photographs by creating pairings that give them new meanings.

## CONCLUSION

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*Epidural. Stage IV.* Emily Schiffer, 2016

The three components of my exhibition *Haul* re-examine memory, history, and familial relationships. Each work in the exhibition conversed with the others. The album pages into which I placed my documentary images were the very pages that once housed the images I used to create *Haul: Gift to My Daughter*. Literally and figuratively, I had removed my parents' photographs to make room for my own. The faces in *Us* reminded the photographic portraits that there are multiple points of view. They acknowledged that there is content in



silence and a presence in absence, and that sometimes what is left out is quite important. The archive of *Haul: Gift to my Daughter* begs the pieces in my exhibition to preserve moments and people that could otherwise be forgotten.

In *Spectres of Marx*, philosopher Jacques Derrida asks us to reconsider the notion that the past has ended. He suggests, that the past is a sort of ghost and that we may need to conjure it, “not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as revenants who would no longer be revenants but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome.”<sup>21</sup> Derrida coins the term “hauntology,” an ontology that is haunted by a past that cannot be consolidated, completed or understood. *Haul* was my ontology, my attempt to welcome my family’s ghosts into an artistic context in which their essence would be preserved.

*Haul* brought peace to my relationship with documentary photography by allowing me to reimagine the context and presentation in which my images are shown. In this art-centric setting, amidst sculptures that inspire metaphorical interpretations, my documentary photographs were reborn into less literal versions of themselves. The obviousness of my hand in the presentation of the images enabled my presence and perspective as a photographer to be acknowledged as well. My images became fluid instead of static, and my authority as “truth teller” was demoted to a flawed and human perspective. The opportunity to create image-inspired sculptures unleashed a freeing and productive way of making that lends itself to visual poetry. I will continue to examine photography’s ability keep memories alive, even if the memories are only fractions of an experience. I enjoy grappling with the question of how to make intimate personal material speak to broader issues. I plan to shift the focus of my work from my family to the tenacity of resilience, and deepen my research about memory, trauma, and interpersonal relationships.

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*. Routledge. New York, NY. 2006.

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